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George Graham: Fried Shad on Blue Monday

by David Cecelski. "Listening to History (/listening-to-history)," *News & Observer*. Published 4/13/2003. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited with George Graham in East Arcadia, a rural community in Bladen County (/geography/bladen), where the Cape Fear River is deep, fast, and still a hundred miles from the Atlantic. Shad fishing is a way of life there, and for half a century his family and neighbors have celebrated the shad's springtime spawning runs with a joyful homecoming and fish fry they call Blue Monday.

Coming in late winter and early spring, when pantries often ran low, the shad runs historically have been a time of bounty and rejoicing in river communities all over Eastern North Carolina. Native peoples relished shad, and slaves caught them by the ton in mile-long nets. The small, bony fish staved off hunger for many a family. Long in decline, shad have been making a comeback as the removal of old dams has reopened some of their traditional spawning grounds.

Born in 1945, Graham has worked for 33 years at a local paper mill, but nobody knows the Cape Fear better. Standing on its banks, we watched the river roar by and the shad fishermen plying their nets as we talked about Blue Monday and life on the river.

In George Graham's words:

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Blue Monday started when I was a little rat about like that. Right down here. We started it down there on the hill, my dad and his cousin, Chester Graham. We had a place cleaned out on the riverbank, and we had us an old barrel and put the wood in it and then build us a fire right there on the ground, put the frying pan on top of it. We all get out and get shad and we have a feast every Monday after Easter.

We started out with the family, then everybody here in the neighborhood, they like shad, so they went to coming, too, and so it's a community thing now. And anybody come -- anybody, don't matter what color it is or whatever. They want fish, they can eat. We fry them nice and brown and crispy, and we cook up the roe with eggs and a little fatback, green sage, shallots. It'll make you lick your fingers. Make you bite your fingers if you aren't careful.

We were raised up there on the farm right down here. We sharecropped, and so we just had it down there on the farm, a big ol' farm. And Blue Monday just kept getting larger and larger and larger. There's people that come from up in New Jersey down here every Blue Monday. They lived here and was into it before they left, and they rent a bus and come down here every year. We get together. We have a ball.

I got fishing in my blood, and I reckon I always will have it in there. When I was a little fella like that, I used to take me a little frying pan, a little ol' skillet like this, have me some meal and some grease up under the bow of the boat and some bread. I'd catch me a fish. About dinner time I'd eat me a fish. Yeah, I was raised up on it now.

The shad is just like a salmon. He'll leave saltwater and come to freshwater to spawn, so that's when we start catching them. Spring of the year. My old instinct will tell me there ought to be some out there. Experience beats anything, and knowing how to fix your net. You know, I fix my own nets and everybody can't do that. And nine times out of 10, I'll swarm 'em when it comes to catching fish. If I don't catch him, I'll run him on the hill.

I started out with an oar. That's the way it was. We built our own boats out of wood. We built it with a belly in the boat, so when you got in, the other end would sit up out of the water and you could paddle just as good as you want to. My daddy finally got him a six-horse Johnson. Man, I was tough then.

You have to fish from the boat. The current is too strong and you can't tie it up to the bank. I go out with a net most of the time. See that guy there? He's putting out now. We drift the net -- we don't set it. We just string the net out cross the river and drift down a half-mile or a couple miles. When he gets it around a curve, he's got to stay on the opposite side of the current to keep it from going in on the hill.

We farmed in the summer time, and in the fall my daddy'd go to the fertilizer factory down there in Navassa and work to make it to next spring. Springtime come, we went back into the farm. We crop tobacco in May, June, 'long in there, and we'd stop cropping on a hot day and we wouldn't stop until we jumped in the river and swam all the way across and turned around and came back.

Me and my dad and my brother used to get up on Saturday morning and we'd go down to the river and catch catfish like this, come back and we'd all get under the hill and we'd dress 'em. He sold them back then and made good money out of it. I've caught so many catfish I don't care whether I catch any or not. But if you do cook a catfish, don't go and fry him like a shad -- stew that sucker.

I stay on the river practically year-round -- from spring to winter. After the shad season, I go after brim, stripers, largemouth bass. We used to catch a few sturgeons up here. That's where caviar comes from. They've been 70-, 80-pound caught up here, probably 5 or 6 feet. When winter come, why sometime I hunt on the river -- deer, bear, squirrels, coon, all of that.

We used to have transportation on the river -- gas barge, pulpwood. All that's quit. We don't even have a barge come up now. We have a few oil barge come up to International Paper Company down there, but that's as far as they come up now. Back then we had Southern Craft No. 7, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn. They'd run this river every week. You could hear them 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, waaaaaaaaaaa. He was letting you know he was coming up the river, and he'd sink you if you weren't careful.

I'd rather be right here on Cape Fear River than anywhere else I know of. I'm serious. I went up New Jersey and stayed a long time -- four and a half months! I said, hey, this is not my place. I'd see squirrels out there, man, I'd get so sick, I'd want to eat me a squirrel. I said I'm going back home. I ain't leaving no more. I ain't gonna go too far where I can't get back the same day. And that's the way I am with home. And I guarantee you, as long as a shad come up this river in the spring of the year, I'm going to eat one."

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